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Information Technology Usage, Travel Motivation and Travel Intention: The Mediating Role of Information Searching and Information Sharing in China's Outbound Tourism

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Abstract *The shift to digital lifestyles after the COVID-19 pandemic has changed consumer behaviour, including tourist behaviour. With information technology, tourists are able to replace physical vacations with virtual tourism at lower financial costs. Industry players need digital technology for marketing destinations, but it is uncertain how usage of information technology by tourism consumers could motivate them to actually travel for vacations. In addressing today's tourist behaviour, this study evaluates the mediating role of information searching and information sharing on the linkage between information technology usage, travel motivation and travel intention. Using convenience sampling, 305 useable data-sets were collected from outbound tourists in China. Adopting the Stimulus-Organism-Response concept, constructs are measured on 5-point Likert scale instrument. Data analysis using SmartPLS 4.0 involves structural model analysis for hypotheses testing and model fit. The findings show that information searching positively mediates the linkage between information technology usage and travel motivation, which drives travel intention. Information sharing has no significant mediating influence in the linkage between information technology usage and travel motivation. These findings provide pointers for tourism marketers and policymakers on strategizing today's information technology as a search tool to drive travel motivation and travel intention.*

Keywords: *Travel Motivation, Travel Behaviour, Information Technology Usage, Information Searching, Information Sharing*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism provides employment for millions of people worldwide, which helps solve societal issues while allowing for economic progress and improving quality of life (Ilić & Nikolić, 2018; Ramkissoon, 2023). Although the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in early 2020 had caused the tourist industry severe financial losses (Gössling et al., 2020; Misrahi, 2020), it has also helped break through structural barriers to digital lifestyles, and accelerated digital transformation (Kohli et al., 2020). Emerging from the post-pandemic era, information technology (IT) is instrumental in world tourism recovery (Al-Khateeb, 2021), with advances in augmented reality and rising adoption of smartphones driving the tourism market.

Before the pandemic, the world's largest outbound travel market has been China, which alone accounted for almost 20% of global tourism in 2019 with spending of USD254.6 billion overseas (Chen et al., 2023; Ganbold, 2023). The rise in outbound tourism in China has been the product of rapid advancement in technology and an expanding middle class

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(Liu & Cheng, 2021). Partly due to the government's one-child policy from 1949–2015, Chinese youths today make up a large category of outbound tourists, being a 'privileged generation' receiving six streams of discretionary income inherited from their parents and grandparents (Rahman et al., 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, outbound tourism in China dropped by nearly 90% from 155 million outbound tourists in 2019 to 20.3 million in 2020 (Blazyte, 2023). As reported by UNWTO (2012), youth travel is less affected by political upheaval and natural calamities, hence, world outbound tourism recovery is expected as China opens its borders after the pandemic.

With advances in technology, the increasing IT usage among consumers is revolutionizing the way people live, work and socialize, with real time information searching and information sharing. Innovative digital tools support tourism marketing by enabling consumers to experience tourism virtually, before purchasing the vacation. IT empowers consumers to replace physical vacations with virtual travel experience, often at lower financial costs (Bilynets et al., 2023). The global virtual tourism industry is expected to grow from US$5 billion in 2021 to US$24 billion in 2027 (Lopez, 2022). However, if tourists choose virtual tourism over real, physical vacations, tourism may not uplift the economies and livelihood of local communities that depend on visitors and tourist arrivals. Amidst today's economic and political climate, it is uncertain how IT usage among tourism consumers actually affects their travel behaviour.

To gain insight into tourist behaviour in today's digitalised economy, this study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model to evaluate how IT usage affects travel motivation and travel intention, when information searching, and information sharing, are introduced as two parallel mediators in the linkage between IT usage and travel motivation. The SOR model has been used in tourism research (Wang et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020). This study aims to narrow the gap in tourism literatures in the information era, where information searching and information sharing were implied as some factors that might affect tourist motivation (Cheng et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2017). The Chinese outbound market serves as the context of tourist behaviour in a digitalised economy. The findings from this study can direct the attention of tourism marketers and policymakers in strategizing IT for shaping tourist behaviour in the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory

According to Hewei and Youngsook (2022), Mehrabian and Russell's SOR model explains that individuals' internal judgments (Organism), which are influenced by cues in the environment (Stimulus), would lead to either approaching or aversion reactions (Response). This model has been used to assess consumer behaviour in the retail setting (Vieira, 2013), in enhancing tourism experience and the tourist shopping environment (Nieves-Pavón et al., 2023), and the relationship between shopping worth, customers' attitudes, and online shopping habits (Ukenna et al., 2023). In the context of travel and tourism, IT usage leads to travel information which is the cue in the environment and acts as the stimulus on the tourist. With IT usage being the norm, real time travel information is received whether intentionally or unintentionally, and this information shapes one's expectations for the travel experience and develops a destination image which is the tourist's internal evaluation and motivation for travel (Sanchez et al., 2022). Travel motivation has an impact on the tourist's travel intentions (Chi & Phuong, 2022). Hence, in the SOR theory, IT usage represents the stimulus, travel motivation as the organism, and travel intention as the response of the tourist.

The SOR theory is supported by Wang et al.'s (2017) studies, which show that IT usage has positive effect on travel motivation and travel intention among senior Chinese tourists, when the 'Organism' was modified with MacInnis's Motivation-Opportunity-Ability model. Past studies indicate that usage of IT gadgets tend to be significantly correlated with certain visitor behaviour as it becomes a popular and helpful method of obtaining tourism information (Chiwaridzo & Masengu, 2023). Travel information has significant influence on the planning process via information searching (Cheng et al., 2024) and information sharing (Arica et al., 2022). However, these two factors information searching and information sharing, were not yet tested in Wang et al.'s (2017) model. Hence, this gap in literature is addressed in this study by introducing information searching and information sharing as mediating factors in the SOR model.

IT Usage

IT usage has become a modern concept of knowledge discovery and accessing social connections or relationships between individuals, which could alter individuals' perceptions (González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023). Digital applications such as social networking sites, consumer review websites, content community websites, and Internet forums are the platforms where IT users can engage in conversions, as well as exchange knowledge, with each other (Appel et al., 2020). Past researchers adopt the function of IT usage for information searches and processing, and assess how these activities influence the behaviour of travellers (Clark et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2023).

Greater IT consumption would be able to assist travellers in making intelligent choices and lower risk and anxiety as safety is a top priority (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2023; Gursoy et al., 2023). Travelers also frequently use the Internet and IT gadgets to gather pertinent details, reduce travel risks, and implement smarter decisions, especially when arranging trips to other countries that are distinct in terms of geography and culture (Trihas et al., 2023). IT usage enables travellers to access information, make comparison of suggestions made by someone they are familiar with or other individuals who share similar interests, making it a reliable source of information for potential travellers (Lam et al., 2020). In the smart tourism industry, tourists can use their mobile phones to perform simple tasks such as pay for transportation, check queue times, or scan for information about a tourist attraction through a supplied QR code.

Travel Motivation

Motivation is a disposition or mindset that develops as a result of a need or want, and propels a person to carry out various kinds of behaviours to satisfy that need or want (Li & Cai, 2012). Travel motivation is the underlying desire driving travel and tourism (Bayih & Singh, 2020). A person's behaviour and actions are primarily produced, directed, and integrated by their biological or psychological wants and desires as well as other important influences (Dann, 1981). Crompton (1979)'s Push and Pull Factors identified push factors as internal desires for escape, self-exploration, relaxation, prestige, regression, kinship-enhancement, and social interaction, and the pull factors as destination attractions for novelty and education. In addition, travel motivation is also described as the desire for new experience (Maghrifani et al., 2022). Chi and Pham (2022) showed that destination image strengthens the effects of travel motives in excitement, escape, knowledge-seeking and self-development. Oliveira et al. (2020) mentioned that before a trip, tourists search for travel information and recommendations to plan, get some ideas and organize their trip. Travellers also use social grooming in social networking sites to get information and that these encounters impulsively influence the information gathering and decision-making processes, and benefit general tourists experience (Chen et al., 2023). Hence, the first hypothesis is stated below.

H1: IT usage is positively associated with travel motivation.

Travel Intention

Travel intention specifically relates to individual's intent or commitment to travel, and according to the idea of planned behaviour, behavioural intention functions as an antecedent to conduct in general (Joo et al., 2023; Sreen et al., 2023). Travel intention may be measured by the level of desire, likelihood, and trip choice (Luo & Lam, 2020). Li et al. (2022) and Khan et al. (2019) show that travel motivation is a driver of tourist intention. Likewise, Sageng et al. (2021) reveal that visit intention is positively influenced by travel motivation. Experiencing some form of nostalgia has considerable favourable impact on people's intentions to revisit places (Karagöz & Ramkissoon, 2023). Motivation, travel experience, and destination image are the three main drivers of travel intention (Hassan et al., 2023; Rishi & Chatterjee, 2023). As shown by Gan et al. (2023) return intentions are predicted by the motive of escape and relaxation. Affect and travel motivation have an impact on individuals' travel intentions, and, on the relationship between novelty and travel intention, travel motivation was an important mediator that connected novelty and tourist's travel intentions (Zhang et al., 2021). Hence, the following hypothesis:

H2: Travel motivation mediates the relationship between IT usage and travel intention.

Travel Information Searching

Data sources requirement triggers preliminary information searching and is the force for retaining the information-searching process (Vidal et al., 2023). Group trip planning and execution require ongoing knowledge collection, to lessen ambiguity and guide decision-making (Schiopu et al., 2022). Searching for information sources such as reviews of dining establishments on social media may assist travellers in making an educated and speedy decision on where to dine (Fernandez et al., 2023; Mohapatra & Dash, 2023). The widespread use of the Internet to access travel-related content suggests that informational systems should enable individuals identify relevant data, and gaining insight into how people look for travel information online is crucial for the design of these systems and their effectiveness (Hamid et al., 2021). Hence, the hypothesis is stated below:

H3: IT usage is positively associated with travel information searching.

Furthermore, social media is fundamentally altering the information environment and how people obtain information (Dwivedi et al., 2021). To reach a choice as a group, collaborative information seeking allows novice group members to gather pertinent travel knowledge from expert group members on social media (Fardous et al., 2019). The process of information seeking including e-WOM is directly associated to the creation of destination image which impacts on their travel motivation, which in turn affects travel intention (Farrukh et al., 2022). Hence, the following hypothesis.

H4: The relationship between IT usage and travel intention is mediated by two serial mediators – information searching

and travel motivation.

Travel Information Sharing

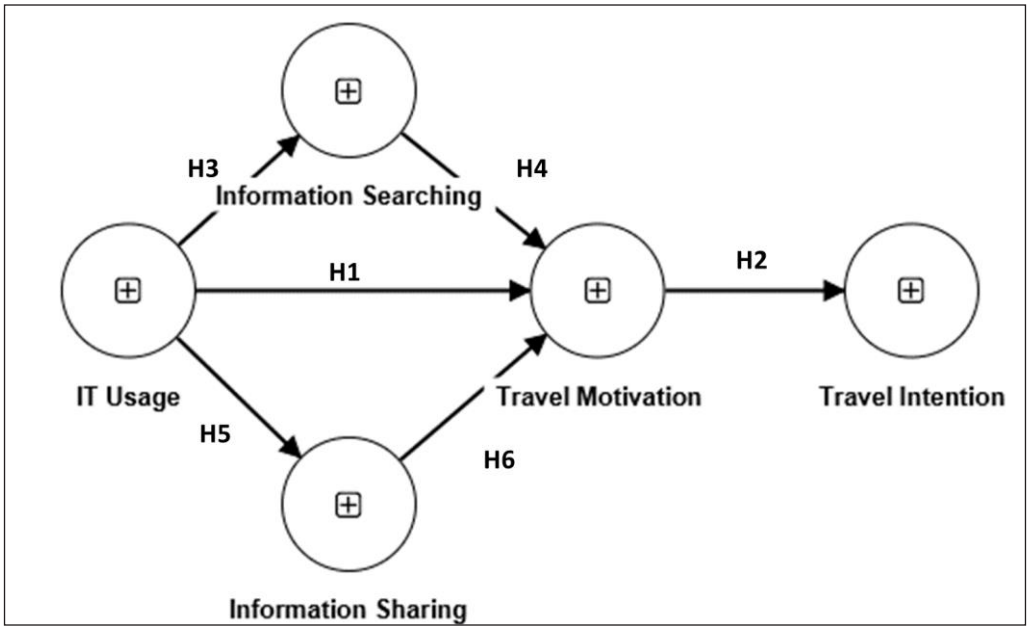
Users of social media generally communicate and socialise with friends and family, or with other strangers who share common interests, and also for accessing or contributing to digital content such as news, gossip and user-generated product review (Appel et al., 2020). Sharing information and engaging target audiences on social media sites have shown positive outcomes in marketing, despite uncertainties about the source and credibility of the information (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Vada et al. (2022) mention that a growing number of visitors choose to travel with friends, family, or loved ones. Social media users stick to social media to share travel experiences with friends and family (Chavez et al., 2020). As more people use social media and other online platforms to share their travel experiences and suggestions with others, IT usage becomes positively related to the sharing of travel information (Oliveira et al., 2020). Hence, the following hypothesis is stated.

H5: IT usage is positively associated with travel information sharing.

Social media is essential for a group of tourists in group travel, for trip planning, sharing travel updates and questions, getting the most recent information about the area, and communicating with other travellers (Acharjee & Ahmed, 2023). Irfan et al. (2022) in their studies indicated how the use of social media give youngsters the access to the opinions of their counterparts and factual information on personal issues as a means of getting around information seeking challenges and discovering relevant experience, thereby influencing their motivation. Oliveira et al. (2020) implied that people who post their travel experience in social media are usually out-going and confident, while those who are easily influenced by what others think, as in information shared on social media, are usually people who have low self-esteem. Javed et al. (2020) indicate that social media usage has direct and indirect impact on tourist behaviour. Direct impact occurs when tourists intentionally use social media to search for information, either for guidance to make choices or to approve or reject their preliminary choices, whereas indirect impact happens when the tourist is regularly using social media with no intention to look for any tourism-related information, but the tourist would be influenced and motivated to make the trip sometime in future. Hence, the following hypothesis is stated.

H6: The relationship between IT usage and travel intention is mediated by two serial mediators – information sharing and travel motivation.

Based on the discussion in theories and hypotheses development, the conceptual framework is shown in Fig. 1.



Adapted from: Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) SOR model for IT usage, travel motivation and travel intention.

Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire is designed by adapting the instrument from previous literatures. The questionnaire consisted of two sections namely, variables-related statements and demographic information. All the items of the five constructs, namely IT Usage, Information Searching, Information Sharing, Travel Motivation, and Travel Intention, were taken from the literatures reviewed in this study. Five-point Likert scale was used in this study, ranging from strongly agree (SA=5) to strongly disagree (SDA=1). Face and content validity of the questionnaire were conducted by taking feedback from two market experts and three academics in the field. Their feedback was significant in improving the questionnaire and make it understandable and reliable. The questionnaire was further tested by carrying out a pilot testing with 30 respondents. The results confirmed that there was no issue with the survey instrument, thus actual data collection was proceeded.

The target population of this study are the local residents in China, aged 18 and above. A cross-sectional survey covering a period of four months was distributed to the respondents via convenience sampling technique, as recommended by previous studies of technology adoption (Ali et al., 2021; Lee & Chen, 2022). Employing G*Power (version 3.1.9.7), the minimum sample size of this study was found to be 68 respondents. The survey was carried out online and the respondents were informed that their personal information will stay anonymous. A total of 305 valid responses were collected after excluding incomplete responses. Hence, the sample size of this study was acceptable for the data analysis.

Partial least squares (PLS) technique was applied in this study to run the analysis by using SmartPLS software (version 4.0.8.5). PLS is appropriate because it focuses on theory building and tolerates non-normality data (Wong et al., 2023). Prior the PLS analysis, this study conducted Harman's single-factor test to evaluate the severity of common method bias. The result showed that the single factor only accounted for 25% of the variance, indicating that the common method bias was not a severe issue in this study.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

Table 1 shows that the number of male respondents is 217 whereas the number of female respondents is 88. In terms of monthly income, 23.4% of respondents earned more than 20,000 yuan, followed by 10,001-20,000 yuan (22.8%), 5,001-10,000 yuan (19.6%), 3,001-5,000 yuan (17.9%), 1,000-3,000 yuan (10.9%) and lastly less than 1,000 (5.4%). These statistics show that individuals with monthly income less than 1,000 yuan are the minority in China. Regarding educational level, majority of the respondents have senior high school education (46.9%), followed by diploma level (24.6%), degree level (14.4%), middle school level (23.1%), and lastly master level or above (4.9%).

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Measure	Value	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	217	71.1
	Female	88	28.9
	Total	305	100
Monthly income	Less than 1000	17	5.4
	1000-3000	34	10.9
	3001-5000	56	17.9
	5001-10000	61	19.6
	10001-20000	71	22.8
	More than 20000	73	23.4
	Total	305	100
Educational level	Middle school and below	28	23.1
	Senior high school	143	46.9
	Diploma	75	24.6
	degree	44	14.4
	Master and above	15	4.9
	Total	305	100

Measurement Model Evaluation

Tables 2 and 3 show the construct reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity of this study. Two items, namely MOT7 and MOT8, are excluded from the study due to low loadings. The remaining items have loading values ranged between 0.600 and 0.954, which is acceptable according to Hair et al. (2019). Convergent validity is achieved in this study as all the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged between 0.529 and 0.801, which are larger than the threshold value of 0.50. Furthermore, divergent validity is validated in this study, in which all the HTMT values are less than 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). Hence, the study confirmed that the measurement model is valid.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Intention	INT1	0.789	0.821	0.606
	INT2	0.832		
	INT3	0.710		
Travel motivation	MOT1	0.604	0.869	0.529
	MOT2	0.600		
	MOT3	0.784		
	MOT4	0.779		
	MOT5	0.766		
	MOT6	0.800		
Information searching	SEARCH1	0.954	0.941	0.801
	SEARCH2	0.881		
	SEARCH3	0.864		
	SEARCH4	0.878		
Information sharing	SHARE1	0.894	0.913	0.778
	SHARE2	0.864		
	SHARE3	0.887		
IT usage	USE1	0.796	0.856	0.664
	USE2	0.857		
	USE3	0.791		

Note(s): MOT7 and MOT8 were removed due to low loadings.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	IT Usage	Information Searching	Information Sharing	Intention	Travel Motivation
IT Usage					
Information Searching	0.505				
Information Sharing	0.516	0.780			
Intention	0.558	0.447	0.330		
Travel Motivation	0.667	0.495	0.504	0.575	

Structural Model Evaluation

Table 4 demonstrates the results of path analysis. IT usage is found to strongly impact on travel intention ($\beta = 0.446$, $p < 0.001$), information searching ($\beta = 0.452$, $p < 0.001$) and information sharing ($\beta = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the usage of IT tools indeed enhance the efficiency and speed of information searching and sharing processes, thus supporting hypotheses one, three and five. Moreover, hypothesis two is supported ($\beta = 0.194$, $p < 0.001$), explaining that travel motivation mediates the relationship between IT usage and travel intention. In addition, results also support hypothesis four ($\beta = 0.054$, $p < 0.05$), demonstrating that the relationship between IT usage and travel intention is mediated by two serial mediators, namely information searching and travel motivation. On the other hand, hypothesis six is rejected in this study ($\beta = 0.037$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting that IT usage and travel intention is not mediated by two serial mediators, which are information sharing and travel motivation. Thus, further discussion is presented in the next section.

Table 4: Results of Path Analysis

Hypo-thesis	Path	Types	Coefficients	T Value	P Value	Remark
H1	IT Usage -> Travel Motivation	Direct effect	0.446***	10.236	0.000	Supported
H2	IT Usage -> Travel Motivation -> Travel Intention	Mediation effect	0.194***	6.659	0.000	Supported
H3	IT Usage -> Information Searching	Direct effect	0.452***	11.011	0.000	Supported
H4	IT Usage -> Information Searching -> Travel Motivation -> Travel Intention	Serial mediation effect	0.054**	2.206	0.027	Supported
H5	IT Usage -> Information Sharing	Direct effect	0.451***	11.237	0.000	Supported
H6	IT Usage -> Information Sharing -> Travel Motivation -> Intention	Serial mediation effect	0.037 NS	1.651	0.099	Not supported

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; NS $p > 0.05$.

DISCUSSION

The findings support the first hypothesis H1, indicating that IT usage among tourists in China positively affects their travel motivation. These tourists could be searching for travel destinations that match their desires, and perhaps with the travel information and knowledge gained, they become more motivated. Perhaps, as they go about their daily life on the Internet or social media, they could come across information about a destination, perhaps from hot topics shared on social media, and the destination image triggers their desire to make the trip. This is similar to Chi and Pham's (2022) findings about the role of destination image on travel motives.

Moreover, H2 is also supported in this study, indicating that travel motivation significantly mediates the relationship between IT usage and travel intention. These findings further confirm that travel motivation drives travel intention, which agrees with past studies (Khan et al., 2019). IT usage reflects a tourist's time and effort on information gathering, planning or preparing for a vacation, and as this process progresses, the intention to travel to the destination becomes more intense. Travel motivation may be in different forms, such as the desire to discover more about the place, to escape from daily life, or to visit friends and family. Such travel motivation impacts on tourist behaviour, with the tourist intensifying IT usage for the intended trip.

The third hypothesis H3 is also supported in this study, indicating that IT usage has direct positive effect on travel informing searching. This suggests that IT usage could influence a tourist to specifically drill for information about a vacation. Information searching whether from official websites of tourism operators or through comments and discussions in social media, serves to obtain required information about the logistics, accommodation, regulations, safety, the physical nature, the socio-cultural environment, and the travel products and services, available at a destination.

The findings further indicate that information searching significantly affects travel motivation. This implies that the information gathered from searching could help remove or reduce pre-conceived risks or doubts about the place, and also, identify novel features or activities in the destination, thereby positively affecting travel motivation. These findings support H4, indicating that information searching and travel motivation are two serial mediators which explain the linkage between IT usage and travel intention.

The findings support H5, showing that IT usage has direct effect on travel information sharing. This suggests that IT usage influences tourists to share travel information either with friends and family, or with the public at large on social media, as mentioned by Oliveira et al. (2020). Trending today, users of social media discuss their travel experience, introduce and promote travel products and services as influencers, give comments and reviews, and show photographs and videos about their travels.

However, H6 is not supported in this study. The findings show that information sharing has no significant mediating influence on the relationship between IT usage and travel motivation, which contradicts findings by Liu and Cheng (2021) and Jansen et al. (2008). Perhaps advances in IT has also brought about new issues in cyber security and new ways of scamming, causing tourism consumers to be more sceptical of unverified information shared on social media. It could also be that outbound tourists in China who have higher self-esteem, are not easily influenced by others' opinions (Oliveira et al., 2020). This study shows that information sharing when directly linked to travel motivation, renders both factors – information sharing and travel motivation, insignificant as two serial mediators in the linkage between IT usage and travel intention.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, in today's digital era where IT is commonly used for information searching and information sharing, it is information searching that plays a significant mediating role in travel behaviour. Information searching has positive, mediating influence on the relationship between IT usage and travel motivation, which in turn drives travel intention. On the other hand, information sharing has no significant mediating role in the linkage between IT usage, travel motivation and travel intention. This study reaffirms past literatures that travel motivation is an inherent desire (Bayih & Singh, 2020), hence may not be easily influenced by information shared on social media.

This study has supported the use of extant literatures to relate the findings about IT usage, information searching, information sharing, travel motivation and travel intention. This has contributed to a modified SOR model in the context of tourist behaviour in a digital world, by introducing information searching and information sharing as two parallel mediating variables linking the tourist's IT usage as the 'Stimulus', with travel motivation as the 'Organism', leading to travel intention as the 'Response'. Further studies need to be done in different socio-economic parts of the world to further validify the conceptual framework from this study, as outbound tourism is a global issue that is influenced by myriad factors.

There are some practical implications for tourism players. Tourism operators should provide pertinent information that meets the different needs and wants of the tourist for planning and taking a vacation, as information searching has positive impact on travel motivation. Destination marketers can segment the travel market based on motivation with digital information describing or depicting destinations as novel, adventurous, mysterious, or relaxing, in drawing upon travel motives novelty, challenge, discovery and escape, respectively. Tourism players need not be overly concerned about information sharing on social media, but instead should use the social media to direct tourists towards searching for credible travel information on official websites. Marketers can gain insight into consumer demand from social media but should focus on giving reliable information about their tourism products and services to match needs and wants of the tourist in today's dynamic market.

Policymakers can direct policies and strategies on IT infrastructures to connect more tourists, destination marketers and tourism operators, and to regulate information flows for reliable information searches, as information searching enhances travel motivation and travel intention. These policies and strategies could improve outbound tourism and impact on livelihood of the local communities in tourist destinations.

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